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Hope for the Peregrine

by Danny Brass*

In the midst of the high Sierra stands Yosemite Valley, surrounded by glacial domes and enormous walls of stone soaring thousands of feet upward above a tree-laden landscape. Snugly nestled in its granite sanctuary, the valley and the accompanying high country of Tuolumne Meadows constitute Yosemite National Park, one of the earliest of our country's pristine wilderness areas to be so designated and thus conserved as an enduring natural heritage.

Although well-known for the grandeur of its mountainous expanse and the splendor that its limitless hiking trails provide, its worldwide reputation is, perhaps, predominantly derived from its wealth of high granite walls, which beckon to rock climbers from the farthest reaches of our globe. It is a mecca to which all of the world's climbers ultimately aspire; a shrine, at whose temple of stone, mettle, skill, and character can all be tested against the resplendant backdrop and airy exposure of the valley floor below.

On an otherwise calm and still morning, when the chink of hardware and the grunts of his own exertions are the only sounds to assail a climber's ears, a great wind may suddenly well up overhead, transfix him to the rock and, in the wink of an eye, disappear. It is as though some unseen force had thrust through the atmosphere and a small measure of sky had been abruptly sucked out of existence. A slight quivering of air and flesh may linger for some moments after the reality has passed. The event, of course, has marked the swift and sure stoop of the peregrine falcon along the cliff face, in its unending quest for food to feed its young.

Observation of the peregrine in its natural state is an experience well beyond belief and from his precarious perch high above the mainstream of the valley's activities, the climber is privy to an unparalleled avian display, not generally available to more earthbound visitors to the park. Their flight along the cliff face is difficult to describe in a manner that adequately conveys the full impact of so memorable an event. It has been superbly depicted by J. A. Hagar (Cade, 1982).

"The patient watcher will see an exhibition of flying that is literally breath-taking... again and again the tiercel started well to leeward and came along the cliff against the wind, diving, plunging, saw-toothing, rolling over and over, darting hither and yon like an autumn leaf until he would swoop up into the full current of air and be borne off on the gale to do it all over again...Nosing over suddenly, he flicked his wings rapidly 15 or 20 times and fell like a thunderbolt. Wings closed now, he shot down past the north end of the cliff, described three successive loop-the-loops across its face, turning completely upside down at the top of each loop, and roared out over our heads with the wind rustling through his wings like rippling canvas. Against the background of the cliff his terrific speed was much more apparent than it would have been in the open sky. The sheer excitement of watching such a performance was tremendous; we felt a strong impulse to stand up and cheer."

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In the very heart of the valley stands El Capitan, a majestic granite tower looming three thousand feet above the valley floor. Climbers the world over flock to scale its headwall and surmount its great overhanging prow. With the aid of powerful field glasses, perhaps a dozen separate parties can be identified through the early morning mist on El Capitan's face. Some climbers can be seen running back and forth in great arcing pendulums, as they seek to traverse from one crack system to another. As they vault across the yawning abyss, they are suspended from an anchor point above them by a shimmering lifeline, a nylon highway eleven millimeters in diameter, which is, in that moment, their only link to the world of men. Other parties may be making slow and deliberate free-climbing moves, as they delicately dance ever upward in their vertical world. Still others may be yet asleep, suspended in hammocks perhaps two thousand feet above the valley floor, silently girding themselves for what well might be their third days climb to the summit.

On El Capitan's North American Wall, a lone tree grows out of the rock, some four hundred feet above the talus slope at the base of the cliff. In its uppermost branches, a single peregrine falcon perches, taking in the sweeping panorama with its all-encompassing eyes. Just below the tree is a small ledge, upon which two fledgings sit, crying raucously for food. This is the peregrine's eyrie, its nest. It is a fitting place for the peregrine to rear its young, the rugged crag and the sublime predator complimenting each other fully. The crag and the bird are inexorably linked. They both belong in and are a part of this regal setting and I am grateful for the privilege of being here to observe them both.

For the last several decades, the range of the peregrine has been steadily decreasing, victims of an insecticide-laden environment. The El Capitan eyrie is one of only two known peregrine nesting sites in all of the Sierra Nevada mountain range (the second eyrie is also located within the confines of Yosemite National park). The birds are, in effect, falling prey to their own undaunted hunting skills; their bodies becoming impregnated with DDT as it concentrates at the top of the food chain, where the peregrine makes it niche. Thus, they maintain a precarious grasp on existence, secured by threadbare filaments more tenuous even than the climber's nylon kernmantle.

Although their future is uncertain, hope has not completely dimmed for the peregrine. A variety of rehabilitation programs exist, supported in part by federal and state funds and in part by wildlife interest groups, ornithologists, falconers, and concerned individuals. Both the National Park Service and the Peregrine Fund are committed to renewal of the eroding peregrine population.

At the El Capitan eyrie, skilled rock climbers have established an aid route up the sheer face, enabling them to easily reach the nest. After the tenth day of incubation, climbers, under the guidance of Peregrine Fund wildlife biologists, carefully replaced the eggs with nestlings obtained from the Predatory Bird Research Group at Santa Cruz, California. Ten days is a critical time in the peregrine's nesting cycle, because at this stage the birds are committed to the rearing of their young and least likely to abandon the nest following the intrusion of the climbers. In this fashion, a maximal probability for success of the project is insured.

Throughout the duration of the nesting season, the eyrie is carefully monitored by a nest attendant. Notes are taken, data compiled, and a watchful eye kept ever alert for the smallest of problems, which might preclude successful rearing of the peregrine brood.

The retrieved eggs are incubated at the Santa Cruz facility. The laboratory conditions greatly offset the problems of DDT-induced shell thinning and a high rate of success has been achieved in hatching out collected eggs; eggs which would most likely have been broken prematurely in the wild.

The young reared at the Santa Cruz laboratories are destined for wild release. Release to their natural environment, however, is not a simple matter of throwing birds into the air and watching them soar into the distance. Quite the contrary, it is a complicated procedure utilizing selected release sites (called hack sites) and requiring an abundance of dedicated manpower. Hack sites exist across the country and hack site attendants spend about six to eight weeks caring for three to six young peregrines, carefully nurturing them toward a successful return to the wilderness environment.

The success of the peregrine release project depends largely upon the work of the hack site attendant. For those interested in the preser-

vation of endangered wildlife, working a hack site affords the opportunity to play a vital role in a worthy conservation effort and a hack site attendant may enjoy a gratifying sense of fulfillment from his contribution to the protection of an imperiled species. Details about hack site positions can be obtained from the addresses below.

As the falcons of Yosemite Valley soared out of sight, borne aloft on wings so swift as to make you believe they could carry the birds to another world, I turned my back on the peregrine's lofty realm. Picking my way down El Capitan's treacherous scree slope, I chanced upon a climber's carabiner wedged in a crack between two boulders; a missile plunged to earth from untold hundreds of feet. Its cracked and twisted frame was mute testimony to the power of the cliff and a silent affirmation of who the true masters of the vertical world of Yosemite really were.

REFERENCE

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HACK SITES— PEREGRINE FUND

Pacific Coast Program
Predatory Bird Research Group
Lower Quarry—Univ. of California
Santa Cruz, California 95064

Eastern Program
Jack Barclay
The Peregrine Fund
159 Sapsucker Woods Road
Ithaca, New York 14850

Rocky Mountain Program
Bill Heinrich
The Peregrine Fund
5666 West Flying Hawk Lane
Boise, Idaho 83709